The Nature of Self

By Thich Nhat Hanh

Good morning, my dear friends, my dear Sangha. Today is the 21st of July, 1998, and we are in the Upper Hamlet. I would like to tell you the story of Blanche. Her Vietnamese name is To, which means "white," and today we call her Blanche. Blanche was a little blind girl who lived with her father and her mother in a little house, at the foot of a mountain where there was a large forest. Her father was a very loving father, and he had made her a flute from bamboo. Blanche played the flute very well. She was a very talented young girl, and she had discovered how to play the flute by herself. Before she was blind, she did not play every day, but after she became blind she would go to the forest and play every afternoon.

Blanche was blind because of a chemical that was sprayed on the mountains and the forests in Vietnam, during the war. Guerrillas hid themselves in the jungle and on the mountains, and the pilots could not see them; therefore they flew airplanes over the mountains and the jungle to spray the forest with Agent Orange. After a week all the leaves would fall, and the trees become bare, then the movement of troops could be seen from an airplane, in order to bomb and kill the enemies. And one day when Blanche was playing her flute in the forest, an airplane came and sprayed the chemical, and it fell on her, and that is how she became blind.

One day she heard that her father died as a soldier in a battle. She could not believe it. How could a person die? She didn’t know what death was, except that one day she had seen a little bird dead, close to her house, and no matter what she had done the little bird could not be revived. She was not going to see her father again, because her father was like the dead bird. So she lived only with her mother. When she heard that her father had died, she was very sad; and that was why she played the flute every day, in order to relieve her sorrow. She was crying, and telling every one, every tree, every cloud, every insect in the forest of her pain and her suffering, and that is how she got relief. Playing flute was her every day practice to gain more peace, more calm and so on. No one could help her, except the flute. Her mother had to cut wood, and transport it to the nearby market to sell, so that she could buy the things she needed. Blanche used to accompany her to the market, pulling the wooden cart, so that her mother wouldn’t have to push too hard. After she became blind, she was still able to help her, and she went with her mother to the market to sell wood. Her mother always bought something in the market for her to eat before they went home, a cake wrapped in banana leaves, or something like that.

One day when Blanche was playing the flute in the forest, she heard someone approaching. She stopped playing, and asked, "Who’s there?" There was no answer, and

she asked again, "Who's there? What is your name?" There was still no answer, but she knew that there was some one very close to her. Finally, she heard someone walking close to her, and then someone began to speak in a very funny way—it seemed that that someone did not know how to speak. "My…my…my name is…Peter." It was a little boy about eleven or twelve. His Vietnamese name is Thach Lang; translated into English, that is "Stone Boy," and that is why I use the name Peter, because Peter or Pierre also means "stone boy."

"Where did you come from? How old are you?" She kept asking him that question. When she had heard a few words from Peter she knew already that this was a young person, a boy. Although she could not see, her way of listening was wonderful and she could already visualize the young man. He was very silent. He tried to say something, but it seemed as though he did not know how to speak the human language. Finally he could say that his name was Peter, and that he came from the top of a mountain very far away. That is all the information she got. She said, "Come over here," with a lot of authority. So Peter came, and Blanche used her ten fingers in order to explore his face. She smiled. "I was right, you are twelve years old, and your face is in the shape of a mango." In fact, his face was in the shape of a mango. They became friends very quickly. Amazingly, during one hour of sitting and chatting together, he learned a lot of words, and they began to speak to each other. He began to tell her what was around them, the kinds of trees, and the colors of the trees, the colors of the leaves, the colors of the trunks. At that time the trees were beginning to grow new leaves.

Blanche invited Peter to her home, and they were given dinner by her mother. This was the first time that Blanche had had a guest in her house, and this boy was a wonderful boy. He did not say much, and it was very difficult to get information about where he had come from, who his father and mother were. Blanche's mother was very careful, because she did not want to touch the seed of suffering in anyone—maybe the father of the boy had already died in battle, maybe his mother was sick—so she was very careful not to ask too many questions. Blanche also learned the way of her mother, and she stopped asking questions. But they continued to talk, and after dinner they went out and played near the brook, and she asked him to tell her what he saw around him. Because of that exercise he continued to learn how to say things.

Peter stayed many days in that home, and became a real brother to Blanche. They were very happy as friends, and he learned to call the mother of Blanche "Mommy." So the two children helped Blanche's mother to put the logs on the cart, and they helped her to pull and to push the cart to the market. During the trip Peter continued to describe to Blanche everything that he saw around. At one time she said, "Peter, you are my eyes. With you around I am no longer blind. It is wonderful to have you with me. Don't leave me, because as long as you are close to me, I don't have the impression that I'm a blind girl any more. " She was very happy.

But something awful happened during that day. There was fighting breaking out in the market, there was bombing, there was shooting, there was burning of the houses, and the two children lost their mother. She was going to a shop to buy some kerosene for the lamp, but because of the fighting she got lost. And they did not know whether she died or whether she was kidnapped by someone. After waiting and waiting until the sun was about to set, they decided to go home and take refuge in their home. They cried a lot,

especially Blanche, and on day Peter proposed that they set out on a journey to find the mother who had been lost. Both of them believed very strongly that if they could find the mother, then everything would be fine again. Remember, that is what they believed: if we are able to find our mother again, then everything will be alright again—there will be no war, there will no fighting, there will be no chemical poisons, and everything will be fine again. That was their strong belief. Blanche believed that when her mother gave her birth, that she also gave birth to the mountains and rivers around her, and the birds, the fish, the streams, and everything. She believed her mother to be someone who could create her and create the cosmos around her, and that if something was wrong; it was because they had lost their mother. If they were able to find their mother again, then everything will be fine again. So the purpose of the two children was to find Mother. I think all us believe the same thing, we are still trying to find our mother.

(Bell)

I know something about Peter. That day, sitting on the top of the mountain, he heard the sound of the flute. Someone was playing the flute down there, at the foot of the mountain, and the sound of the flute was wonderful. The music spoke a lot to him, and suddenly he was born. Alone, he tried to find his way down from the top of the mountain to see who was playing the flute, and finally he discovered Blanche, sitting at the foot of a tree and playing. That afternoon they met each other and became friends, became something like brother and sister to each other. Blanche had the talent of playing the flute, and Peter had the talent of singing. We don't know how he learned to sing like that, so that every time he sang he was able to make the sky and the earth quiet. He could even make the fighting quiet. He just sat down very quietly with solidity and freedom, and raised his voice to sing. A storm could be dissipated by his singing. While he was singing, many birds would come from many directions and circle around, over his head. That happened always, every time Peter started singing.

During the battle when the children lost their mother, it was awful—they heard the cry of children and adults dying or being wounded, they heard the sounds of the houses burning, they heard the shouting, the fighting--and suddenly Peter sat up. It is very dangerous to sit up or stand up during a bombing, because the bombs could kill you. The safest way is to lie down flat every time there is shooting or bombing going on. All the children in Vietnam knew that: every time there was fighting and shooting you had to get flat. Blanche was very used to that, and she pulled Peter down and got him to lie very still. But at one point Peter would not obey her any more, because it was very oppressive—the war, the fighting, the crying, the shouting—that is why he sat up and began to sing. And as his voice rose like that, suddenly there was a transformation in the air, and the storm of the battle seemed to die, and a lot of birds came and circled around their heads, and finally the fighting died down and the soldiers left. The people in the village began to come out and help the people who were wounded in the fighting and bombing. Now, Blanche was able to sit up, and both children began to inquire about their mother, only to find that she was not there. They spent many hours looking and asking neighbors, but no one saw her, and so they went home. A number of days later they decided to go on a long, long trip to look for their mother. Don't think this is someone else's story, because this is my story, and it is your story also. All of us are trying to find our real mother, our common mother.

Blanche and Peter went through many dangers. This story is very long, and this morning I am only telling you some of it. Both children got arrested, because the police suspected them of being "liaison children," children who could bring information to the guerrillas. So they were both arrested, and Blanche was put into a school for blind children. After some months in prison, Peter was sent to a school of young army officers, a school for boys whose fathers had already died in battle. Peter was brought to that school, and he had to follow the military discipline, like all the other boys. You know, Blanche and Peter were both artists, and so they suffered very much from that kind of discipline, and they were separated.

One day Peter talked to his friends in the school, and he described the suffering that the children in the country were experiencing. They came together and decided to ask their teachers and the administration of the school, instead of teaching fighting, to teach the children the way to love each other, the way to bring peace and harmony into the school and into society. They dared to come to the teachers and the members of the school administration and to ask them not to teach them how to kill, how to fire guns any more, but teach them something that is more helpful. Because of that action they were arrested, they were not allowed to be students in the school any more, and Peter was locked into the prison with other prisoners, although he was only twelve or thirteen years old.

In prison, Peter met a very strange monk. That monk was in prison too, because he was trying to do something for peace. His name is funny--his name is "the Coconut Monk." I personally have met the Coconut Monk. When he was a young man he went to France and studied engineering, but when he went back to Vietnam, he did not like being an engineer anymore. He wanted to become a monk, and he practiced a lot of sitting meditation. He liked to sit where the atmosphere was calm and fresh, so he climbed up in a coconut tree and built a platform up there, and he sat in meditation up there. That is why people called him the Coconut Monk. I think the son of the American writer John Steinbeck also went to Vietnam, and he had the chance to spend a few months living with the Coconut Monk.

I knew the Coconut Monk. He was doing something that people considered crazy, but he was a real, good monk. He tried to stop the war in his own way. He went to collect pieces of bombs and bullets, and he melted them to make a mindfulness bell. Every night he would invite the bell to sound, and he would chant the name of the Buddha and Avalokitesvara. He told the pieces of metal that he collected, "You have been playing the game of war. Now I would like to help you practice. I am going to transform you into a bell of mindfulness, so that you become enlightened and become a bodhisattva trying to enlighten the people in this country who are sleepy, with brothers fighting and killing each other in a very stupid way." He asked friends to come every night, and he invited the bell to sound, as everyone was breathing in and out and transforming themselves into peaceful people, and not fighters anymore.

One day he went to the Presidential Palace, and he wanted to have an interview with the President of South Vietnam. With him he had a wooden house, with a cat and mouse living inside together. I don’t know how he educated the cat and the mouse, but they co-existed. He gave the mouse things to eat, and the cat things to eat, and neither ate each other. (Laughter.) He wanted to make a declaration: "You see, even the mouse and the cat can co-exist, so why cannot we co-exist with each other as human beings? If I can make

the cat and the mouse live together, how is that we human beings cannot live together in peace? Why do we have to fight each other like that? But they still considered him to be a mentally ill person, and they did not allow him to come in and meet the President. He appeared to be a disturbed person, but in fact he had a lot of wisdom. His name, again, was the Coconut Monk. Nguyen Thanh Minh was his "identity name," but people knew him as the Coconut Monk. So Peter saw him and quickly became friends with him in prison.

You know that Peter was a kind of Coconut Monk, too. He did not like the war, he wanted to end the war and bring peace to his people. His purpose was to find his mother, so that everything would be all right again. Because he was collaborating with prisoners in asking for the end of the war, he continued to get into trouble. At that time, not only was the Coconut Monk in prison; there were also other monks in prison. Peter was transferred to another prison where he met three hundred monks, who were in prison because they refused to be drafted into the army. When Peter came he suggested that they start a fast, to say that you cannot lock people up because they do not like the fighting. Many, many people joined the monks in a fast, and everywhere that Peter went he created a movement like that, so that he was described by the administration of the prison as a troublemaker. Finally, they could bear it any more, and they wanted to push Peter to the frontier, to North Vietnam, because he was in the south. There was a little bridge connecting one side of the river to the other, in the Demilitarized Zone, and the name of the river was the Ben Hai. They could not handle Peter, a twelve-year-old boy, so they wanted to expel him to North Vietnam.

In North Vietnam, many people welcomed him, and asked him about the situation in the south. He told people very honestly about the situation in the south, but they wanted to make him into an instrument of propaganda, telling only evil things about the south, and saying good things about the north. But he refused. Everywhere he went he always told the truth: that no one wanted the war, that everyone wanted peace. So the government of North Vietnam did not like him either, and he was exiled to a mountainous area where he had to cut trees and carry bamboo sticks, and he was always watched by a soldier.

One day he was working hard on a mountain, cutting bamboo trees, when he suddenly missed Blanche too much. He saw that the soldier, his guard, was there, and he sat down and began to sing. As he started to sing, all the birds in the area came and circled around him. The soldier was very surprised to see that, and Peter just walked away. He got out of the mountains, and tried to find a way down to the south, to meet Blanche.

Blanche had been living for more than six months in the school for the blind children. That night, Blanche could not sleep. She did not know why she could not sleep. The moon was very bright outside. She could not see the moonlight, yet she knew that the moon was there, and that outside everything was very alive. In the dark she found her flute, and she went out to sit in nature, and she began to play the flute. The sound of the flute guided Peter, so that he could find her, and they met each other again. When Peter recognized Blanche playing the flute, he came close to her, he took her in his arms, and he proposed that they get away from the school for the blind and go back to the mountain where they could find their thatched house again.

It was midnight, but with Peter beside Blanche, there was no danger. The children found their way out of the city, and they began to walk to the highlands, where they went in the direction of the mountain they had originally come from. When they arrived many days later at the thatched house, they did not see Mother. She was still lost, and had not been able to find her way home to the children. So Peter decided to invite Blanche to go to the top of the mountain where he originated. Blanche had never asked him who his mother and father were, and Peter himself did not know how he was born, or who his parents were. Because Blanche was blind, climbing the mountain took a long time. With Peter's help, Blanche took step after step, in order to climb the mountain, and finally they arrived at the top about 8:00 p.m., when it had already begun to get dark. Of course, Blanche did not see anything. Peter remembered that on top of the mountain there was a very beautiful rock, and in the rock there was a hollow that was as big as a grapefruit. Every night the dew would come and collect in that hollow, and Peter remembered that every time he drank the dew from that hollow he had gotten a lot of energy and happiness. He believed that if he could give that water to Blanche to drink, and if he could use some of it to wash her eyes, that she would recover her eyesight again. He had that conviction. That is why he had invited Blanche to come with him to the very top of the mountain.

When they arrived, it was about eight o'clock in the evening, and they were both very tired. Peter helped Blanche to lie down to sleep. They had a conversation before they slept, and he said that at midnight, when the dew began to fill up the hollow in the rock, he would wake her up so she could drink the water, and so he could use the water to wash her eyes, so that her sight could be restored. Blanche followed his advice, and lay down. Peter used his overcoat as a blanket, and put it on Blanche so that she could sleep. At midnight he woke her up, and helped her to climb up a few meters more, so she could reach the highest point of the mountain, the beautiful rock.

Imagine…it was a full moon night, the full moon night of the fourth month of the lunar calendar. You know, that was the night that the Buddha was born: the full moon night of the fourth night of the lunar calendar. It was exactly that night. So when they arrived at the top of the mountain, Peter used his hands to make a cup for the water, so Blanche could drink. Blanche felt that the atmosphere was very still, very sacred. Suddenly she felt that it was safer for her to kneel down in order to receive the wonderful water, so she knelt down and put her hands in the form of a lotus. By that time, Peter had taken water in his palms, and he gave it to her to drink. She knelt there in a very respectful way, and drank, little by little, that dew, that wonderful water, given to her by Peter. And as she continued to drink, she felt a new source of energy born in her. She felt very refreshed, very joyful. Finally, Peter used that water to wash her eyes three times, very carefully. After that he helped her to go back to the flat rock, and asked her to lie down and continue her sleep. He said, "Go to sleep my sister. I will also go to sleep with you. I will not be far from you. I will stay here and lie down and sleep also, very soon."

Blanche had a very deep and restoring sleep that night. In the morning, when she woke up, she was very surprised to have a very strange feeling. Suddenly she brought her hands to her eyes, because the light was so strong. She did not know that she had recovered her eyesight. She was so surprised when she woke up and had to bring both her hands up to hide her eyes from the light. Very slowly she began to peer through her fingers…and she saw the blue sky for the first time, after so long. And she knew that she had recovered her sight because of the wondrous dew that Peter had used to wash her eyes. She slowly sat

up and looked around. It was wonderful. It was the top of the mountain. All around her were the clouds and the dew and the mist covering everything, and she had the impression that she was on an island, completely separated from the world of suffering, war and destruction. It was like heaven. She was like a completely new person, and she was so glad. She was completely healed, she was a new being, and she was so happy. And then she began to think of Peter, and she began to call his name: "Peter! Peter!" and her voice echoed back to her. She heard no response from Peter, and she began to panic. Peter was no longer there.

Suddenly Blanche looked up and saw the stone. The stone was in the shape of a young boy, and it was exactly the shape of Peter. And she suddenly remembered what Peter told her at the foot of the mountain. Peter had said, "My sister, you asked me how I have learned to sing. I don't know. But I was on the top of the mountain for many, many years…I don't know how many years I was on the top of the mountain. I had the opportunity to listen to the wind, the rain, and the birds for I don't know how many millions of years, and suddenly I knew how to sing."

Peter may be a human being, but he may be something else – something more than a human being. Now Blanche saw Peter as a rock, and she believed that initially he was a rock, sitting on top of the mountain for may millions of years, until suddenly one day he heard the sound of the flute coming from the foot of the mountain. Peter had transformed himself into a little boy, and found his way out to see who was playing the flute. At that time, Peter had vowed to become Blanche's eyes. She remembered one day when she had said to Peter: "Peter, do you know that you are my eyes? With you around, I am no longer a blind person." All these kinds of memories came back to her, and suddenly she began to understand that Peter was her eyes. Peter would never disappear; he would always be there, because now she would always be able to see things again. Peter had not left her. Before that she could not bear it; she had cried, and she had pounded her chest, because there was a lot of attachment in her. She had wanted to be blind again so that Peter would appear to her again. But now, she was enlightened. She saw that now Peter was in her, in the form of eyes, and wherever she went, Peter would be with her. With that kind of understanding and enlightenment, the sorrow in her began to disappear, and she picked up her flute and began to play. And you know something? The flute now expressed her insight, and the clouds and the mist and the blue sky and the rock and the mountains and the trees all stopped, and listened deeply to the sound of her flute.

(Bell)

If you have eyes capable of seeing things around you, you know that Peter is always alive in you. The Buddha is someone who has wisdom, who has eyes capable of seeing things as they are. Many of us are blind because we are not capable of seeing things. We live in ignorance, we live in the dark, and we don't know where to go. We don't know how to rediscover our mothers. That is why we need the Buddha so much. The Buddha appears to us like a brother, and he serves as our eyes. Let us not try to find the Buddha in another person, let us try to find the Buddha within ourselves. We have the capacity of looking deeply in order to see the true nature of things, and if we have eyes capable of seeing things as they are, the Buddha is always with us.

I gave that story to a friend to read, and after reading it he said, "Peter is Jesus Christ." I said, "That is true." Jesus Christ is not an entity that you have to look for outside yourself; Jesus Christ is within you. He is the eyes that we need not to be blind any more. Our practice is always to get out of our blindness, to have the kind of eyes that can see things as they are. We know that Peter has not left us at any moment, because he is always in our hearts. If we know how to live mindfully, Peter is always there every moment in our daily lives.

Today the children may like to draw a picture with Blanche, the little girl, and with Peter. And after you have painted or drawn the two children, make another drawing, and this time draw just one person, and in that person you can see both Blanche and Peter at the same time. So, happy practice today. When you hear the bell, you stand up and you bow to the Sangha, and you go out for continued practice.

Dear friends, there is always a better way to practice listening to the bell. When you listen to the bell you may like to allow all your ancestors to listen at the same time. Because all our ancestors are still alive within us, and they are there in every cell of our body. You invite your ancestors to listen to the bell with you; the bell is a voice calling you back to the here and the now, for you to become fully alive again. The sound, first of all, seems to be something outside of you, but if you listen that way, the sound is coming from deep within…the voice of the Buddha inside, calling you back to the safe island of self, and the voice of your ancestors calling you back to life. That is why the sound of the bell is neither outside nor inside, because the reality transcends notions of outside or inside. You can listen deeply, better than when you first began the practice. Allow every cell in your body to open up, so that the sound of the bell can penetrate deep into each cell of your body, or in a different way you can say that you open every cell up so that the sound can come out of it. Your ancestors, whether blood ancestors or spiritual ancestors, are there, present in every cell of your body, and the sound of the bell might come from there or from outside--it does not matter. But to listen to the calling, and to go back to life, to be awake, to be alive, to be in the present moment, is our practice.

Maybe many of our ancestors did not have the chance to practice listening to the bell, and to become fully alive and present in the here and the now, and now you are doing it for them. And suddenly, just by taking one in-breath, you make all your ancestors fully alive at the same time. This is what we can do. Among us there are those who can do it. They sit there with you, they listen to the same sound of the bell, but they can go very deep, they can go very high. So it depends on your insight, your visualization, your concentration, whether the effect of the sound of the bell is deep or not deep enough. Every time you walk, you do the same. You are not a separate entity, and you know that you can walk in such a way that all your ancestors can make the same steps with you, at the same time. When you take a step, your mother also takes a step, your father, your grandmother, your grandfather, and all your ancestors, are taking a step, and the Buddha walks with you, taking that very step with you. Peter is always there. Peter is walking with you at every moment, and walking like that is to liberate yourself from the prison of sorrow that you have locked yourself into. Walking like that can be very liberating. If you walk like that you don't walk just as a separate individual. You walk in such a way that all your ancestors, blood and spiritual, walk with you. You know that you carry within you all generations of ancestors, and more than that, you carry within you all future generations. Even if you are still very young, your children are already there within

yourself, and their children are already there within you. So make a step for all of them, liberate them, liberate our ancestors, and liberate the future generations, by just making one step. And if you can make such a step, you can make two, and you can make three. The practice can go very, very deep.

I would like to share with you a poem that I have been using for eight years now, but it is not available in English or in French. Among you there are poets and composers…I hope you can make it into a piece of music to help with your practice.

Thay recites a poem, consisting of two four-line stanzas.)

Eating in the ultimate dimension,

This is for you to practice during lunchtime. Today you have a formal lunch.

Eating in the ultimate dimension—because there are two dimensions to reality. The first dimension is called the historical dimension. In this dimension of reality you can see the beginning and the ending, the inside and the outside, birth and death, more or less, the coming and the going. It is the dimension of the waves, because looking at each wave you have the impression that there is a beginning to every wave, an ending to every wave, the being and the non-being of the wave. First we think that there was the non-being of the wave, and suddenly there is the being of the wave. And after that there is again the non-being of the wave. So in that historical dimension it seems that all these things exist: being, non-being, beginning, ending, high or low, more or less beautiful, and so on. These kinds of ideas create a lot of suffering and despair and jealousy and anger. So when you are in the historical dimension, please be very careful not to be caught by it.

Then there is another dimension called the ultimate dimension. This ultimate dimension is not separate from the historical dimension. In the case of the wave, it is water, because water cannot be separated from waves; but when you touch water, you don't see a beginning, an ending, high or low, being or non-being--these notions that we use to speak of waves. The fact is that the wave is a wave, but while living the life of a wave, the wave can very well live the life of water at the same time. So when you live in your historical dimension, you should train yourself touch and to live the ultimate dimension at the same time. That is our practice: be the wave…okay, but you have to be the water. If you are to become stable, free, if you want to have the elements of non-fear and non-discrimination within you, then touching the ultimate dimension is a necessary practice.

A wave can be subject to fear, to jealousy, to discrimination, if she lives very superficially in the historical dimension. She sees that there is a beginning to her life, an end to her life, she sees that she is not the other waves, that she is more or less beautiful than the other waves, that she is struggling with the other waves, and that she suffers quite a lot. But if she bends down and touches the nature of water within her, she sees that she is in the other waves, the other waves are in her, and there is really no beginning and no end, and because of that she gets out of fear, and discrimination and jealousy. So touching the historical dimension deeply, you touch the ultimate dimension. And when you are able to touch the ultimate dimension, all discrimination and fear vanish, and you get the real peace that you deserve.

When you listen to the bell, you can try to listen to the bell in the ultimate dimension, in order to realize that the bell is always there—it's not because the sister uses a stick and makes contact that the sound is born. The sound is always there. The nature of the sound is no-birth and no-death, always existing. You also share the same nature. Your true nature is the nature of no birth, no death, no beginning, and no end. Unless you touch your true nature of no-birth, no death, you cannot obtain that kind of insight, the insight of no-birth and no-death that will bring to you the element of non-fear, non-discrimination. If you continue to be the victim of discrimination and fear, then suffering is going to continue for a long time. The greatest relief is to be obtained only when you are capable of touching the ultimate dimension. In touching the ultimate dimension, you don't have to reach out. A wave doesn't have to reach out in order to touch water, because she is water. Peter is within you, Peter is not a separate identity. While living every moment of your daily life, learn how to touch Peter in you. The nature of Peter is the nature of no-birth and no-death, no coming and no going, and you share the same nature with Peter.

Eating in the ultimate dimension, I nourish all my ancestors. I keep my ancestors alive, because every spoonful that you take is to nourish you, of course, but it is also to keep all your ancestors alive at the same time. By feeding yourself you are feeding all your ancestors, and also your children and their children. Taking one spoonful of food, you know that you are feeding all your ancestors and your children and grandchildren. It is just like walking. All my ancestors walk with me.

When you are in your sitting position, and enjoying breathing in and breathing out, try breathing for your mother, your father, your grandpa, your grandma, or anyone. This is very pleasant to practice. Pick someone, call his or her name: "Mother, please breathe with me." And that is not a visualization that is the truth. When you breathe, your mother in you breathes also. When you were a tiny living being in the womb of your mother, every time your mother breathed in, you breathed in; every time your mother ate, you ate. The same thing happens now, every time you breathe in, your mother breathes in, your ancestors breathe in, and your child who is already there, or who is to manifest later, they are all breathing in with you. That is the way to breathe in order to touch the nature of no self. People talk a lot about no self, but they don't know exactly what it is. Here we are not talking about no self, we are living the reality of non-self. When you breathe, you breathe for all your ancestors and your children.

Every thing you do, you do not for yourself alone, you do for us all. And walking like that, breathing like that, listening like that, you are touching the nature of no self. And when you touch the nature of no self, you touch the ultimate dimension. There is no "I," there is no "you," because I am in you, and you are in me. We inter-are. That is not only true with Peter and Blanche, but it is true of everyone else.

Eating in the ultimate dimension, you maintain alive all the generations of ancestors.

You allow, you help coming generations to find a way to go up.

"To go up," means to transcend suffering, to transcend discrimination, to liberate ourselves, our situation and society. We are still caught up with many negative things: discrimination, violence, hatred and so on. So eat in such a way that you can open the way for future generations to transcend all these negative things.

When I sit with you and I eat my meal, I practice that. I chew with these words*: I touch deeply the food, I touch deeply the Sangha embracing me, the Sangha in which I take refuge; I allow my ancestors to eat, my children and grandchildren to eat at the same time with me, and I touch the ultimate dimension during the time of eating.* Those are the first four lines. The next four lines: *eating in the ultimate dimension, you chew in the same way that you breathe, with real rhythm.*

You chew and you are aware of what you are chewing. You are aware of the food in your mouth. You chew, and you touch the very nature of the food in your mouth. Eating mindfully is to be aware of what you are eating. If you are mindful, then you can discover the true nature of the food, which is also the nature of inter-being.

Yesterday I talked about the milk we drink every morning. Drinking the milk, you know that it is not only sweet, but that it is also somehow bitter, because of the way we raise the cows, we treat the calves, and so on. We can be aware, when we chew the food, or when we look deeply into the food: we can see the ingredients, the elements that have come together to produce that food. A piece of carrot, a piece of string bean, a piece of tofu, a grain of rice, all these things contain the whole universe, and if you look deeply, you can see the lives of other living beings in it. You can see the compost; you can even see the dry bones of other living beings in the refreshing piece of tofu. A piece of tofu is not only vegetarian. The dry bones of tiny living beings have become compost, and the grain of rice, the piece of tofu, the piece of string bean, contain all of that: the sunshine, the wind, the clouds. Vegetarian and non-vegetarian, all that is inside each piece of food. So if you know that, you will know how to eat in order to keep your compassion alive.

If we know how to produce our food in such a way that we can reduce violence and destruction, and decrease the suffering of living beings, we are keeping alive the compassion inside. The one who grows food, and the one who eats the food, both can help to maintain the compassion within our hearts. We know very well that without that element of compassion within us, we cannot be happy persons. Without compassion we cannot relate to any living beings, including humans. Eating, walking, doing your daily activities—we should learn how to do these things mindfully, in a way that can help compassion to stay alive in us. This is very important, that is our practice, for eating is also to preserve our compassion, because you don't want to eat the flesh of your own son.

Yesterday Sister Annabel gave a wonderful talk on the Four Nutriments, in English, and those of you in the Lower Hamlet may like to listen to it. Sister Chan Duc elaborated the teaching I had offered the day before on the Four Nutriments. I only spoke about the first two nutriments, and she continued with the third and the fourth. I was talking one day about the therapist as someone who can cook for us, offering us the kind of food that can keep our bodies and our souls sane and healthy. The therapist should also be an architect, in order to create an environment where we feel safe, where we can live our lives with freedom, with stability, where we can be protected, where we will not be destroyed by sickness, depression, and so on. A therapist should practice like an architect, like a cook,

like a teacher, like a monk, like a Buddha, creating space where you feel safe, where you get only the sane kind of food, that won't destroy your body or your consciousness. In our daily lives we consume so many toxins and poisons, we consume a lot of violence and craving and suspicion and despair, and destroy ourselves. So the therapist, like a Buddha, should be able to create a Pure Land, so that people can come and be protected and be healed, be transformed. The therapist should be at the same time a Sangha builder, a Sangha convener, a summoner of practitioners, so that among us there are those who have a solid and joyful practice to support us, to remind us, and to teach us how to live deeply every moment of our daily lives, to breathe, to walk, to listen to the bell, to enjoy our lunch together. Therefore the therapists, like the physicians, have to come together to operate as a Sangha, because alone they cannot fulfill their task of being an architect, a cook, a Sangha builder, of being a Pure Land. Therefore, all of us have to follow the same principle of creating the Pure Land and building a Sangha.

Eating in the ultimate dimension, I chew as I breathe, with rhythm. You might use this gatha, this poem, in order to chew your food, and keep your awareness alive, and touch the ultimate dimension while eating your lunch

Aware of the suffering, we nourish each other. The main thing is to maintain compassion alive, and to help beings going to the other shore.

When we eat, we have to be aware of the suffering also. That does not mean that we have to suffer, because eating can be very joyful, but the background should be always there. To have an opportunity to sit down quietly like that, to have enough time to spend with the Sangha, and to eat this amount of food together in an atmosphere of safety, of friendship and of awareness, is something not many people can afford. That can give rise to a lot of happiness, but you know that happiness is always seen against the background of suffering, in order for happiness to continue. The moment when you exile suffering, happiness will no longer be happiness. It's as with black and white: white will appear very clearly against a dark background. Happiness is also like that. So, we are with the Sangha, enjoying a meal in mindfulness, the joy of being with the Sangha, the joy of feeling protected and supported by the collective energy of the Sangha; and yet we know that suffering is there in life, in every grain of rice, in every piece of tofu, in every spoonful of milk. That is why we take the vow that, although we have to suffer when we feed each other, we accept that in order for a chance for every living being to go to the other shore, the shore of enlightenment, the shore of safety.

Living beings eat each other, that is a fact. Tigers eat the deer, big fish eat the small fish, and we also consume other living beings. Even if we are vegetarians we can only reduce the eating of living beings to some degree. That is why there is the words '*Aware of the suffering'* inside, because there is a little bit of suffering in that taste of happiness, enough to keep our awareness alive. Even if I have to become your food, I will practice in order not to let hatred become my nature. I offer myself to you so that you can survive. That is the reality of the world: living beings are eating each other. As practitioners, we cannot entirely escape that situation, but our practice is to keep compassion alive, and to relieve as much suffering as we can through our way of daily living

Aware of the suffering we try to feed each other, even with ourselves. The main thing is to keep compassion alive, and to help beings to the other shore, the shore of safety, stability and freedom.

I think human beings can be described as having a safer life than other living beings. Although we have no right to hunt each other or kill each other--the law forbids it--if we continue to create war, to exploit each other, to make use of others to get rich, to consume more, and we continue to do these things at the expense of other living beings, it is as though we are eating the flesh of our father or mother, our brothers. We are actually one with all of these beings, whether they live in an over-developed country or an under-developed country. We know that if we learn how to refrain from making war, from creating more social injustice and repression, we can bring much more safety to human beings, and at the same time we can better protect the lives of other living beings. Now, war and alcohol and drugs and consumption and violence are making us much less safe in our lives as human beings. In fact, human beings can put themselves in a much safer situation than other living beings, but because of our cravings and discrimination, we have made our situation much less safe than it could be. That is why our practice is to be aware, to be mindful, to live each moment of our lives deeply, so that we can keep compassion alive in our hearts, so that our lives and the lives of those around us become safer. When we enjoy more safety, we will be able to provide more safety to other living beings. We can protect the environment; protect the ecosystem, so that other living beings can also enjoy safety.

With the awareness of suffering in my heart, we nourish each other. We know that the main thing is to keep compassion alive and to help living beings cross to the other shore, the shore of greater safety, the shore of more freedom." It is so easy to practice in Vietnamese, because it is the kind of poem that has only five words in each line.

I use the poem in order to maintain my mindfulness of life. You might like to use that poem in English, or German. You might rewrite it so that it will fit the rhythm of your practice.

I am blooming as a flower, I am fresh as the dew. I chew according to this gatha also. I also use the gatha: *This is the Pure Land, the Pure Land is here.* This also is a song that is available in Vietnamese, but our friends who do not speak Vietnamese have not had a chance to learn and to practice it. Thay Doji has tried to translate it into French; but because he used the Vietnamese music, it does not sound very natural to the French ear, so I hope that someone will help with new music. Each line has only four words:

Day la tinh do
Tinh do la day
Mim cuoi chanh niem
An tru hom nay.
But la la chin
Phap la may bay
Tang than khap chon
Que huong noi nay.
Tho vao hoa no
Tho ra truc lay

Tam khong rang buoc
Tieu dao thang ngay.

I chew my food with this poem. And the meaning is this:
This is the pure land;
The pure land is right here.
This mindful smile helps me
To establish myself in the present moment.
Look, I see the Buddha as a red leaf,
And the dharma as a cloud.
My Sangha is everywhere,
And my true homeland is just right here.
Breathing in, I see the chrysanthemum blooming;
Breathing out, I see the bamboo bending.
My mind is totally free,
And I enjoy it day after day.

During that time of breathing, you keep the Pure Land alive, in the here and the now. Yesterday I said that it’s up to you to choose either hell or the Pure Land, because both hell and the Pure Land are there in every cell of your body. If you allow hell to manifest, it will manifest. All of us have experienced how hot hell is, but if you want to choose the Pure Land, you can do that. Just make use of your breathing, your walking, in order to make the Pure Land manifest. With these methods of walking, of breathing, of eating, you keep the Pure Land alive. You don’t have to die in order to enter the Kingdom of God; in fact, you have to be very alive to do so. With full awareness, when you become fully alive, you only need to make one step, and there you are—in the Kingdom of God.

So I repeat this gatha:
This is the Pure Land
The Pure Land is here.
This mindful smile helps me
To establish myself in the present moment.
Look! I see the Buddha as a red leaf;
Look! I see the Dharma as a cloud.
My Sangha is everywhere…

Everything I see, I identify as elements of my Sangha--the blue sky, the clouds, the leaves, the trees, the birds, the pebbles, the path where I practice walking meditation---everything belongs to my Sangha. I don’t have to go back to my hometown in order to find my Sangha. My Sangha is everywhere. Everything around me supports my being awake. Every sound, every sight supports and maintains me in the Pure Land. My lack of mindfulness alone can bring me out of the Pure Land, but everything else around me is supporting me in order to nourish me in the Pure Land.

My Sangha is everywhere,
And my true home is right here in the here and the now.
Breathing in, I see the chrysanthemum blooming,
Breathing out I see the bamboo bending
My mind is fully free,
And I enjoy it day after day, month after month.

Please make use of that gatha, rewrite it in German, in Italian, in English, in French. We offer it to our friends as a gatha of practice for our walking meditation, our sitting meditation, and our mindful lunch.

There was a nuclear scientist who lived in England, named David Bohm. He used the terms "the explicate order" and "the implicate order." His insight is similar to the insight of the historical dimension and the ultimate dimension. He said that in the explicate order, you see things outside of each other. A table is outside of a flower, and you are outside of me. But the other dimension of reality can be called implicate order, that is, if you look deeply, you see that the flower is in the table and that the table is in the flower. One electron can be everywhere at the same time, and one electron is made of every electron, and so on. It is very much the insight of inter-being, and in the implicate order, everything contains everything else. Just as I said yesterday, looking deeply into a flower you can see a cloud, you can see the sunshine, you can see the earth, you can see the compost, you can see everything in the cosmos within it. So, we know that looking deeply helps us to see the ultimate dimension, the implicate order, and we get rid of notions like inside and outside, this or that; we get rid of pairs of opposites.

In Buddhist language, we have the term *nirvana.* It is another term to describe the ultimate dimension of reality. Nirvana means first of all extinction. You may ask, extinction of what? It is first of all the extinction of ideas, such as birth and death, inside and outside, being and non-being. These ideas are responsible for our fear, our illusion, our suffering, our discrimination. Inside my right hand there is the wisdom of nondiscrimination. My right hand never discriminates against my left hand. The insight of inter-being is there in my right hand, in both hands. That is why they can be together all the time, they can be in harmony with each other all the time. Nirvana is first of all the extinction of ideas, of pairs of opposites. It also means the extinction of the kind of suffering that can be created by these ideas. Because of these ideas, we have created a lot of fear and suffering, so when we are able to remove the ideas, then we can remove the suffering caused by these ideas. Death for instance--death is an idea. And birth is also an idea.

When you look deeply into a sheet of paper, and also into yourself, you will be able to touch your nature of no-birth and no-death. To be born, according to our idea, is to become something from nothing. From no one, you suddenly become someone. That is our idea of birth. But if we practice looking deeply, we see that that is a wrong idea, because nothing can become something from nothing. A sheet of paper, before it came into existence, had been something else. You can see a sheet of paper in a tree, you can see a sheet of paper in a cloud, because touching this sheet of paper with your mindfulness, you can see a cloud inside. You don’t have to be a poet in order to see that: you know that if there were no cloud there would no rain, and no tree could grow. If the tree could not grow, you could not have the sheet of paper, because this sheet of paper is made from a kind of paste made of trees. So it is sure that the cloud is in the sheet of paper, and if you try to remove the cloud, the sheet of paper will collapse. There would be no paper at all if there were no cloud. That is inter-being—the cloud is inside the paper.

You can see that the sheet of paper was not born from nothing it was born from something. It was born from the cloud, and from the sunshine, because the sunshine also

helped the tree to grow. It was born from the logger, who cut down the tree, and it was also born from many other elements. So, before the sheet of paper was born, it had already been something. The day of its birth is only a day of continuation. You can see the previous lives of the sheet of paper. That is why it is better to celebrate our birthdays by singing "Happy Continuation Day." Really the moment of your birth is only a moment of continuation. Before you were born of your mother, you had been there in her for many months. That was not exactly the day of your birth. You may be tempted to think that the real day of your birth was the day of your conception, but if you ask the same questions, you will find out that even before that day you had already been there somewhere. Maybe half in your father, or before your father was born, you had been there in your grandfather, in your grandmother. It is a very interesting trip to go and search for your identity, your origin. In the Zen circles, they sometimes give as a subject of meditation a question such as, "Tell me what your face looked like before your grandmother was born?" That is an invitation for you to go and find out your true nature. If you do well, you will touch the nature of no-birth and no-death. You will know that you have never been born. You have gone through a series of transformations, of renewals, but the idea of being born is just an idea. If you have never been born, how can you die? The idea of dying is that from something you suddenly become nothing, from someone, you suddenly become no one.

When we burn this sheet of paper, you may think that it will die and become nothing, but that is not true. After it is burned, the sheet of paper becomes clouds again, becomes smoke, becomes ash, and becomes the heat that penetrates your body and the cosmos. It would be very interesting if you could follow the journey of the sheet of paper. You could go to the cloud and observe what the cloud is doing, and what the sheet of paper is doing. You could go after the heat produced by the burning of the sheet of paper, and see how far it can go, and what it will produce in the future. You could follow the amount of ash, to see what kind of flower it will become in a few months. It would be a very interesting discovery. The true nature of the sheet of paper is no-birth and no-death, and you also share the same kind of nature. Your true nature is no-birth and no-death, and that nature we call nirvana. The Buddha said that you can touch nirvana, even with your body. You can touch your true nature of no-birth and no-death, even with your body. It is like the wave—the wave can touch her nature, namely water, but she is water. What is the subject of touching and what is the object of touching, when the wave touches water? She is already water, why does she have to touch it? Nirvana is our true nature, Peter is our true nature, and we don’t have to look for him or for her. Our true nature is no-birth and no-death. With the practice of deep listening, of deep touching, of deep looking, we will be able to touch our true nature, and we will be able to free ourselves from notions, from ideas, from fear, from discrimination, and that is the way we can get the greatest relief with the practice.

Yesterday there was a question on life and death: from where have we come, and after dying, what are we going to be? The most important topic of meditation is life and death. They always say so; the matter of life and death is the greatest subject of meditation. The business of life and death is a big business, which means it is the object of your meditation. When meditating on the object of life and death, you will be able to touch the ultimate dimension, the nature of no-life and no-death, and you will touch nirvana, even with your body.

So there is a continuation. You might come to a practice center to learn the practice in order to get some relief, to undergo some transformation and healing. You might suffer less because of the practice of sitting and walking and breathing, total relaxation, touching the earth...yes! But the greatest relief can only be obtained if you are able to touch nirvana, to touch the ultimate dimension, and that is not something outside of our capacity. When we look at the wave, we know that the wave can lead her life as a wave, but if she knows how to live her life as water, the quality of her life will be much greater. She will not suffer a lot, like the other waves who don't know that they are, at the same time, water.

(Three Bells—end of Dharma Talk)